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Discourse of Fairfield

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THE PUBLIC MAN.

A DISCOURSE

ON OCCASION OF THE

DEATH OF HON. JOHN FAIRFIELD,

DELIVERED IN WASHINGTON, DEC. 26, 1847,

BY JOSEPH HENRY ALLEN,

PASTOR OF THE UNITARIAN CHURCH.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

WASHINGTON:

T. BARNARD, PRINTER.

1848.

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THE PUBLIC MAN.

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A DISCOURSE

ON OCCASION OF THE

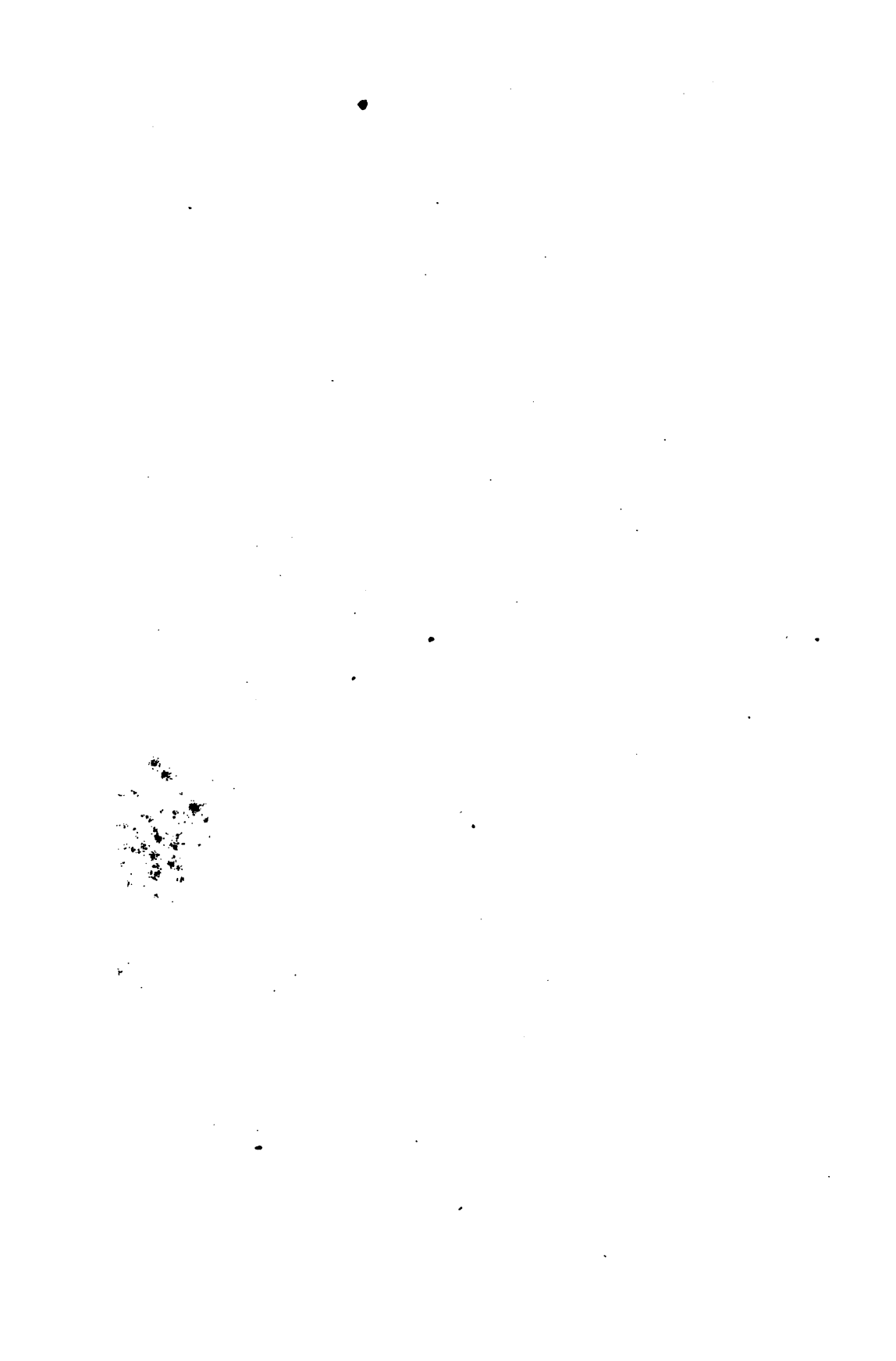
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WASHINGTON, *December 27, 1847.*

DEAR SIR :—The undersigned were present yesterday, and listened, with those feelings which it was adapted to excite, to your chaste, appropriate and eloquent Discourse upon the death of Governor Fairfield.

Although it must necessarily have been the result of a few hours of study and application on your part, it was conceived in such good taste, and its tone and sentiment are calculated to do so much good, that we respectfully request you to furnish a copy for publication.

JOHN P. HALE,
JOHN G. PALFREY,
B. B. FRENCH,
CHARLES HUDSON,
DANIEL P. KING,
LEVI WOODBURY,

W. W. SEATON,
WM. G. ELIOT,
JAMES ADAMS,
C. S. FOWLER,
GEO. J. ABBOT.

We concur in the above request.

J. W. BRADBURY,
W. CRANCH,
ALBION K. PARRIS.

Rev. J. H. ALLEN.

WASHINGTON, *December 28, 1847.*

GENTLEMEN:—I have received your note of yesterday, asking a copy of my Discourse for publication. To a request coming in such a form there is no room for refusal; and the manuscript is accordingly at your service.

Thanking you for the unexpected honor you have done me by this proposal, and with sentiments of the highest esteem,

I am your obedient servant,

J. H. ALLEN.

Hon. JOHN P. HALE, and others.

NOTE.

I have employed the interval of time since the delivery of the following Discourse, in carefully substantiating the accuracy of the facts and allusions contained in it, and have not found cause to vary at all from any statements I have made.

The gentlemen to whose friendly interest I am indebted for my materials, will accept my grateful acknowledgment. To those who have kindly offered to furnish additional data to be embodied in the Discourse, I return my sincere thanks ; but as its nature and design, no less than the short time of preparation allowed, prevent its being a full and authentic record of events, I have preferred to retain it in its original form, only adding a few lines where required by the connexion.

By the courtesy of the gentlemen whose duty it became to announce the death of Governor Fairfield in the Houses of Congress, I am permitted to insert their remarks in the form of an Appendix.

J. H. A.

WASHINGTON, *December 29, 1847.*

DISCOURSE.

JOB xxiv. 24.

THEY ARE EXALTED;—IN A LITTLE WHILE THEY ARE GONE!

THEY ARE BROUGHT LOW AND DIE, LIKE ALL OTHERS;

AND LIKE THE RIPEST EARS OF CORN ARE THEY CUT OFF.*

The sudden and painful announcement, made to us yesterday morning, as we entered this house for our Christmas service, has left one thought foremost and prominent in every mind. It would be doing injustice to the occasion which Providence has offered us, to refuse to take the notice of it, which its grave and melancholy importance demands. The thoughts suggested by an event so striking, gathered up in the brief interval that has since elapsed, it is my duty and my mournful privilege to offer to you now.

I need not stand here, my friends, to moralize upon the uncertainty of life, and the unlooked-for coming of death. God has spoken to us, in the events of his Providence, louder and better than the voice of any man can speak in his behalf. Within these last few months the Senate of our country has been nearly decimated by the

* Noyes's Version.

impartial and unsparing hand of death. And now, for yet further warning that our counsellors act in the direct presence, as it were, of futurity, and before the judgment of the spiritual world, one more is taken from our very side;—one in the midst of days and the full maturity of judgment; one in the active and busy discharge of the duties of his station; one singularly trusted, and honored by the forward and repeated testimonials of his fellow-citizens' esteem; one blending the strict principle and clear conviction of Christian faith, with the cheerful spirit and domestic affection which bring a man most near to the friendly regard of others; one diligently fulfilling the unostentatious duties of humble life, worthily bearing the unsought honors of office, patiently submitting to the long pressure of disease and pain, and with a steady and quiet faith preparing through his life's course for its inevitable and at last strangely sudden close.

It is not wise, as a general rule, to speak of the personal character of those lately deceased, at least from this sacred and public place. A friend's partiality, the unavoidable uncertainty of human judgment, and the altered and softened feeling which one's death brings about in us, are so many perils to that perfect truthfulness, without which praise is but impertinent, and eulogy a poor and impotent pretence. Yet some circumstances may justify me in departing for the first time from that rule.

We meet, many of us, as strangers; and a stranger's death impresses us far less than that of a neighbor and friend. We lose here, in some degree, that sense of the close interweaving of life and life, of the intimate interdependence whereby each man is united with all others, which in a differently constituted community makes one of the strongest incentives to virtue, and the most powerful restraint upon wrong. The more seriously, then, should an instance of this sort be reflected on, so as to restore a portion of that impressiveness, which is in danger of being lost.

And besides, the voluntary assumption of a high and public responsibility excludes a man from the possibility of escaping the world's judgment, that cannot be bribed to withhold its condemnation or applause. His acts are done in the world's eye. His conduct is seen and judged from far. His influence, for good or harm, is widely felt. For example or for warning, it must and ought to be widely used. And in view of all these reasons, I will use the privilege of this day, to speak a few words of him who is lately gone. Rendered more pleasant and valuable to me by the slight acquaintance which I can only regret now was not longer, the unanimous and singularly concurring testimony of his personal friends, borne out by what I can gather of the public acts of his life, is urging me to improve this occasion, to speak the word, frankly and sincerely, which is now his last earthly due.

JOHN FAIRFIELD was born on the thirtieth day of January, 1797, and died on the evening of the twenty-fourth of the present month ; having served his State four years each, as Representative, Governor, and Senator. He has therefore lived something more than half a century ; and of this period about one-fourth has been passed in the highest councils of his State or country. It belongs to another time and place, to consider more in detail both the incidents of his life, and the traits of character which have made him so widely honored and beloved. Here and now, we may think of him as one we have been accustomed to meet in friendly and religious fellowship ; as a constant friend and supporter of our little Church ; as a man and a Christian, whose private worth we have known somewhat, and esteemed. And the illustration which his life has given us of a few sterling qualities of mind and heart, must needs be welcome, and cannot fail to be impressive now. It may serve as a fit introduction and enforcement to some few words touching the standard of personal character, by which one in his high and responsible position should be measured.

I would first mention, as an honorable thing for him, that in all the expressions I have heard of warm esteem and approbation, no allusion whatever has been made to anything of a party character. Whatever honor he has gained has been from the integrity of his position as a man, and from the discharge of what he held to be his

personal and private obligation. His name is most nearly associated with no sectional or party triumph ; but with acts involving what he held to be Christian duty, and the claim either of private humanity and justice, or of a broad and generous nationality. Of the numerous public measures in which he doubtless had a share, and in which it is but common candor to presume that he followed his own conviction of right, it does not become me to pass any judgment in this place. His own private conception of duty is that by which each must abide the perfect witness of the all-judging God. That is a private matter between a man and his Maker. A sacred and impenetrable veil is drawn over it, which the eye of man cannot pierce — beyond which his verdict may not dare to go. Of one's opinions and modes of judging, so far as they involve his personal character, presuming his sincerity, we have no right to speak. And it is the more grateful therefore to me, to remind you of the public acts and passages of his life, where he has planted himself on Christian principle, and independently pleaded in behalf of the simply right. It is honorable alike to him and to his fellow-citizens, that the strong regard and interest manifested towards him, by which he was almost by acclamation lifted to the highest offices of trust in his native State, was due, not to the advocacy of any one interest, or fidelity in party allegiance, but to the ground he nobly took and vindicated at first, alone, when a

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ed, honest and true, in each different sphere of action. It was this which made him — domestic as he was in his tastes and affections, and rather seeking privacy than notoriety — yet clear decided and unalterably firm, when called to assume a difficult responsibility; and which made him acknowledge one and the same obligation, wherever he chanced to be. It was a fine illustration of this, that once, in answer to the direct and searching question of his youthful pastor at home, he answered, without any sign of impatience or resentment, “Yes, I do, when I take my seat as legislator, remember then my responsibility as a Christian, for the word I speak or the vote I give.” How beautiful a testimony to the truthfulness of their Christian intercourse,— to the fidelity of the pastor, and the simple frankness and integrity of the man. The same religious faith and principle sustained him, not in patience so much as gladness and alacrity of spirits, through the many years’ course of the painful complaint which has now taken him away. “Cheerfulness is half the victory,” said he to one who was suffering under a like severe disease; giving then the counsel, we may be sure, wrung painfully enough out of the well disguised and uncomplaining experience of long years of distress. With the willing sympathy of friends and fellow-Christians, we remind each other now of his example, in life, in duty, in suffering and death: and in submissive trust commend his family, so afflictively bereaved, to the

love of the widow's God, and the Father of the fatherless.

Before the solemn portal of the grave, all human passion is at peace. The envy and care, the jealous animosity, the party strife, have no more a voice in the still and silent courts of Death. Difference of opinion is forgotten now in the common thought of mortality; or swallowed up in those broader principles, of sentiment and duty and faith, which make the best portion of the life of every man. We forget the partial, in which we were at variance, and remember the universal, wherein we are all alike. We bow in reverence before the dictate of the Almighty; and, subdued by that, we cherish the memory of the departed, as of a fellow in our humanity — as of a brother in our Lord.

I do not, brethren and friends, I dare not, hold up any one man's character as a standard or a model for our own. It is for the sake of the personal interest which attaches to a few special traits, when illustrated in the life of one we have known and lately lost, that I bring together, in this passing record, what I have been able to gather of the character and acts of our departed friend. Quietly, unobtrusively, as a good man would choose to be spoken of,— without vague declamation and empty praise, which are but dishonor to the memory of the deceased,— I have

sought now to bring before you, as grouped in my own mind, the facts and principles that made the ground-work of his life. They help, by a living example, to make more clear a few points in the ideal standard of personal character, which should be held by every man, and especially by every public man.

I make no apology, then, for going on to say in a few words something of what that character should be. I shall not insult your understanding, or trespass on the liberty of your own moral judgment, by any attempt to define and prescribe the requirements of duty for you; but the sacred motive and the universal principles from which all duty must proceed, it is always in place to urge. The dignity of the topic, the solemnity of the occasion which brings it before us now, the imperishable majesty and grandeur of the scheme of Christian truth, of which it is but a part — all combine to abate the imposingness of personal distinctions, and to place us on the even level of our humanity. We stand together all alike as men. Far towering above us is the majestic form of our Christian faith. Around us lies the great plain or battle-field of life; and at our side solemnly sound the hushed and awful voices of the dead. But one thought seems to belong to this hour. One lesson seems impressed by the dread event. One question presses heavily on the conscience. One solemn mandate comes to us in the tones of mourning that pay a sad respect to the memory of

the yet unburied dead. The honored and trusted man that is among you, what is it for him to be in all respects as he should be — an upright and true man, a whole man, a Christian man in his appointed place?

Taking up the principles suggested, in the order in which they have already been ranged and illustrated, I shall go on to state in a few short words the corresponding points of Christian character. None is so mean, and none so proud, but he must confess the authority of that law.

The very first feature of such a character, is that it proceeds by broad principles, and personal fidelity to the highest right; not by allegiance to any set of measures or set of men. This is the absolute and indispensable condition of all public virtue. However much the man may act with and for a party, and to favor its interests, it must be because he believes that in that particular thing he does, he is doing best service, not to his side, but to truth, to his country and to God. He must be utterly forgetful and unconscious that any other obligation can possibly for an instant interfere with his sense of what is right. By whatsoever name any such other obligation may be called, when he rises in behalf of principle, it ought to fall from him, "as a thread of tow is broken when it toucheth the fire,"—as the green withers fell from the hands of the stout Jewish champion. The

language in which any such factitious obligation is spoken of, should be to him as a lost and unknown tongue. The ideal of absolute right should so penetrate and take possession of his soul, as to render utterly impossible any minor sense of imperfect obligation,—consuming it as fire burns dry stubble, or as the rod of a more potent enchanter devoured all the magicians' rods, that tried their rival arts.

It is only by some such image as these, of perfect authority, of absolute supremacy, that we have a right to represent the majesty of the command of truth and justice. No doubtful jurisdiction, no divided or disputed sovereignty, can there be brooked or endured. Right and policy — principle and expediency — fair allies enough if the former is supreme, cannot stand for an instant on an equal footing. No man can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or else he will hold to the one and despise the other. **YE CANNOT SERVE GOD AND MAMMON.**

If section or party is the rival to a true patriotism, nothing less broad than the whole country,—if the whole country in its length and breadth is the rival to humanity and right, nothing less broad than the universe, should be comprehended in the circle of your vision. Are you a man the humblest in the land, having yet the right and duty of opinion with respect to the public welfare; or are you the highest in place and authority in the land,

so that her weal or wo may perchance depend on your single voice,—that only must be the principle to guide you—that and no lower. Bate not a jot or tittle of that requirement; else your footing is a quicksand, while you breast helplessly the wild and surging storm.

Next, let the principle be one and the same, that guides your public and your private life. “As Bishop I may not shed man’s blood,” said one of the ecclesiastical nobles of France, “but as Prince I will lead my men to battle.” “But,” said his servant, too simple to comprehend the casuistry, “when Satan comes for the Prince, what shall become of the Bishop?” In the sight of God, of man, of your own conscience, armed with the terrors of both, the man in his public or his private capacity is absolutely one and inseparable. If he does not bring the honor to the station, the honor it brings him will be but the empty prefix to a name. Nothing is worthy of any man’s respect, but that genuine self-respect, which regards all stations as alike in dignity, if alike in the worth that fills them; which is above the paltry vanity or the miserable conceit that perpetually seeks to plant its footsteps still above another grade; which scorns the base compliance and the unworthy arts, whereby some have sought the fictitious and imaginary consequence of some special department of service. Q reform it altogether! Keep to that whole-

ness, simplicity and truthfulness of that character, which sees in the variety of places only varying opportunities of doing right. Seek in all alike the integrity, purity and high-mindedness, which are every man's best treasure in the sight of God.

What a privilege it is, beyond almost every other, that the high principle and honorable conduct of a man of the world, is such a sincere and unsuspected tribute to the power and reality of virtue! What a rebuke to the mean and cowardly betrayal some men make, in distant places, of the personal purity and the moral obligation they would have been afraid and ashamed to betray at home! Men cannot say, such an one does so of course, and because he must. They cannot enfeeble the force of his words, by saying or hinting that he says them professionally, and because just that is expected of him. Nothing of that ungenerous and pitiful surmise which so utterly stops the preacher's mouth and shackles his hand, that he has not nerve enough to put his own doctrine in practice,—no slur upon his inexperience in real life, can be in the way, when a man of business, dealing daily in the affairs of the world, lives out simply, strongly, unostentatiously, the law of right as it lies in his own conscience and heart. He is the true teacher. He is the prevailing preacher of righteousness. He declares, unembarrassed and free, the principles he has tested, and lived out, and abided by. Here virtue is not a sounding

name, but an outstanding fact; not an exhortation, but a fulfilment; not an assertion or an anticipation, but a life. There is not a single one of you, my hearers, whom I may not envy the opportunity you have, of being a far more effectual preacher of righteousness, than ever I could be.

And lastly, religious principle as the foundation and vital element of such a character—faith in God and Christ, as the support of virtue, the inspiration of manly endeavor, the consoler of grief, the assuager of pain, the preparation for life and death,—of this too must one word be said. That one word is, *you are MEN*. In the heavy pressure of duty, in the whirl and perplexity of care, in the burdensome and weary responsibility, in the dread anticipation of possible calamity and certain death, you have the wants, the trials, the spiritual need of the universal human heart. “One may live,” (I use the solemn language of a tribute paid but two years since to one of our most wise and distinguished jurists,) “One may live as a conqueror, a king, or a magistrate; but he must die as a man. The bed of death brings every one to his pure individuality—to the intense contemplation of that deepest of all relations, the relation between the creature and his Creator.”

Here is something which comes close home to the experience and secret thought of us all. This gradual dissolution; this conflict, day by day and week after week,

with pain; this yielding before the slow approaches of disease; this parting one by one with the thoughts and plans and prospects that had made life pleasant to us; this familiarizing ourselves, through suffering, with the form and features of death;—all this—yes, all, in its slow inevitable progress, in its varied processes of agony and feebleness and the gradual loss of hope—we must submit to it all, in such measure and in such shape as we shall be called to meet it. Whether with us the struggle be one of moments, or hours, or days, or weeks, or months, or years, it is yet the same; in its brief agony or lengthened tediousness, it is all the same. It is the one continually repeated struggle of Life with Death, of Nature with Dissolution. We can hold parleyings with the Destroyer. We can make a truce with him for a time. We can deal with symptoms by science, and prolong our days by care. But the process is still the same; and the result the same. Life grapples with Death; and the strife may hold out long: but Death always comes off victorious. One after another is encountered and overthrown, and still Death unwearied seeks his man. The furrows on the brow, and the paleness of the cheek, the features becoming more thin and the step more unsteady,—all these are the signs and tokens Death puts upon his victims, when he marks them for his own. The time is coming with us all. The change we see in one another's faces, after the interval of no more than a single year, is too plain a symptom to be

mistaken. The tokens of Death we read in one another. We know that we are wearing them ourselves. Gradually but surely we are walking together towards the silent valley; and it will not be long before we are all gathered there.

Look back upon that interval of a single year. Its last Sabbath has summoned us to this solemn service. Besides those who have fallen in blood upon the bloody battle-field, count the number of those high in place and honorable, whom God has called away.

“They are exalted;—in a little while they are gone!
They are brought low and die, like all others;
And like the ripest ears of corn are they cut off.”

One thing only is safe and sure—that stainless virtue, reposing on religious faith and principle, which is as far from bravado as from fear, in the face of life and death,—which is perfect trust in God, and perfect reliance on the word of Him, who **BROUGHT LIFE AND IMMORTALITY TO LIGHT.**

And once again:—Is it too tedious a repetition, to say that the time for your Christian virtue to act is now. It is no one single burst of generous sentiment that is wanted, no enthusiasm of the moment, no loud and boastful talk, no noisy measures of sudden sectarian or private action. All these are easy and cheap. What we want, what you want, is something higher, broader,

deeper far than they. It demands nothing less than the serious and earnest purpose of a full-grown man. It exacts the whole homage of the heart, and the steady allegiance of the life. The price will be no less than that; and what is purchased is fairly worth the price. It is that great joy, which "fills the soul as God fills the universe, silently and without noise." It is like unto treasure hid in a field; the which when a man hath found he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all that he hath, and buyeth that field.

Now is the trial of your principle. Now is the test of your integrity. Now is the time for your virtue to be at work. As I look upon you, one by one, I cannot but feel that in the natural course of things I shall record, one by one, in my own memory, the deaths of all or most of the strong active and influential men, whom I see before me; and that, in all probability, you will be severally taken out of the very press of care, in the fulness of days and strength, still surrounded with the occupations, and bound in the habits of thought, that belong to your present way of life. Any plan for virtue hereafter, that does not include the practice of virtue now, is thoroughly deceitful, false and wrong. To God and your own conscience I then commend you; that you may follow the footsteps of all the honorable wise and good; that your life may be perfect and upright, and the end thereof be peace.

APPENDIX.

IN SENATE.

MONDAY, DECEMBER 27.

THE LATE SENATOR JOHN FAIRFIELD.

Mr. BRADBURY rose and addressed the Senate as follows:

Mr. PRESIDENT: I rise for the performance of a duty too painful for language to describe.

One who was with us in this Chamber, at the last meeting of the Senate, attending to his official duties, assisting in our deliberations, and as confidently looking forward to the future as those who are now present, has suddenly fallen in our midst. He is now numbered with the dead.

Four times has the Senate already been called during the few days of its Session, to manifest the last tokens of respect for the honored dead, who have been prevented from entering upon the field of their labors in the present Congress. *Now*, the destroyer has entered these Halls, and struck down his victim before our eyes.

The Hon. JOHN FAIRFIELD is no more. He died at his lodgings in this city on Friday last.

The sudden and startling announcement of his death preceded the intelligence of danger.

On the morning of that day he was in his usual health, and met his friends with his accustomed cheerfulness and cordiality. At noon, he submitted to a surgical operation, to which, with undoubting confidence, he had looked for relief from an infirmity under which he had labored. His physical energies were not equal to his fortitude and

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courage. His system sank under the unabated anguish which followed ; and at twenty minutes before eight o'clock in the evening, in the full possession of his mind, he breathed his last. Scarcely had the friends that were with him anticipated danger, when his pure spirit took its flight.

From an affliction so appalling, it is difficult to divert attention, even to contemplate for a moment the life and character of the deceased. Gov. FAIRFIELD was born at Saco, in the county of York, Maine, January 30, 1797. In that place he has ever resided. Distinguished by an ardent love of knowledge, an active mind, and great strength of purpose, on arriving at manhood he devoted himself to the law, and entered a profession which has contributed its full share in the establishment and defence of constitutional liberty. At the bar he soon acquired such reputation, that he received from the Executive of the State, the appointment of Reporter of the Decisions of the Supreme Judicial Court.

While in the successful performance of the duties of this office, he was called by the electors of the First Congressional District, without solicitation or desire on his part, to take his place in the councils of the nation as a Representative in Congress. He received a re-election ; and it is well known, that he discharged the responsible duties devolved upon him on trying occasions in a manner alike honorable to himself and to his constituents.

His services were now demanded in a different sphere. He was elected Governor of his native State ; and so strong was his hold upon the confidence and regard of the people, that he was thrice re-elected to the same exalted station. It was during this period of his public life, when great and unusual responsibilities were thrown upon him as the Chief Executive of the State, growing out of collisions with a Foreign Power, that he displayed a *decision and firmness of character* which commanded the respect, and fixed upon him the attention of the whole country. He became, emphatically, the favorite of his State ; and he was now transferred from its Executive chair to a seat upon this floor, to fill a vacancy created by the resignation of his predecessor. In 1845, he received a re-election to the Senate, for the term of six years. It may be remarked, as a singular fact, that in all the offi-

ces he has held, he has never served out the regular term, but has been transferred, by promotion, to a higher place.

To you, Mr. President, who knew him well, and to the Senators long associated with him, and united by the ties of respect and friendship, I need not speak of his honorable career in this body.

You will bear witness to the sound judgment and ready zeal which he brought to the discharge of his varied duties—to that honesty of purpose which knows no guile—to that frankness and sincerity incapable of concealment—to that firmness of resolution which no difficulties could shake nor dangers overcome—and to that purity of life, and *conscientious regard to his convictions of right*, which distinguished him as a man and a Christian.

How happily these qualities were blended in his character, is known to you; how justly they were appreciated by the people of his native State, is seen in the confidence they yielded, and the honors they bestowed.

As a friend, he was devoted and sincere; and few there are who have secured the attachment of a wider circle, or bound them by stronger ties of affection. His loss to the public, to his friends, and above all to his deeply afflicted family, what words can express! I cannot attempt it.

He has left behind his example, his character, the influence of his actions, and, in his sudden death, the admonition that “public honors and exalted station add no strength to the tenure by which life is held.”

HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES.

Mr. HAMMONS rose and spoke as follows:

Mr. SPEAKER: In raising my voice for the first time in this Hall, it devolves upon me to perform the most painful and melancholy duty of my life.

The Hon. JOHN FAIRFIELD, Senator from Maine, on Friday last, at twelve meridian, was in the enjoyment of good health, with an unusual flow of spirits, surrounded with honors, and possessed of all the enjoyments that earth can afford; at a quarter before eight on the evening

